Breeze 0' Wind
By Alexander Key
Two hurricanes, one human, hit a Gulf Coast town.

I NEVER seen nothing like that summer when I was fifteen. The Gulf was every kind of blue and green, and so alive with color it took your breath away, and all through the long, burning days there'd be great mountains of clouds boiling up from the river swamps behind town, and mov-ing seaward in snorting squalls that often turned to water-spouts. Late in August the sea changed. It lay silky and still under the heat, and there was something sort of hanging in the air that made you uneasy. Sounds carried a great dis-tance, and you could hear the put-putting of the shrimp trawlers clean out to the island pass; stingarees swarmed along shore, and most any time you could watch sharks or tarpon chasing mullet right up into the shallows near the house. Never did the oleanders bloom so heavy, and never were the figs so large and sweet. And you felt somehow that all of it was wrong. The days were like rich poison fruit turning ripe, and they seemed to put a spell on everybody and everything.

I remember it was three weeks since I'd missed my trip with Matt on the Angelus; my foot was a heap better and I was able to walk all right if I didn't step too hard. Mom was in the kitchen frying grouper and hush-puppies, and I could hear her talking to her-self as she rolled the hush-puppy batter into cones and dropped them into the hot grease with the fish.

I knowed she was worrying about Fiddler. Somehow it didn't seem right, because with the Angelus a week overdue, it looked like Matt was the one she should 'a' been thinking about. Cap'n Ned never stayed out more'n a couple weeks.

"You'd better wash up for supper," she called. "What's happened to Fiddler?"

I knowed she didn't want the truth, so I didn't say nothing.

"Micky Joe, answer me!" mom snapped. Did he go shrimping today?"

"I never seen his boat go down the channel."

That boy!" She always got a different tone in her voice when she was talking of Fiddler, like he could do no wrong I reckon it was because he favored pa so much. His nick-name didn't come from being musical, though you'd 'a' thought he was the Pied Piper, the way the girls took after him. I think it started from his being quick, like those little fiddler crabs that swarm over the mud flats. He was the quickest big feller I ever seen.

Mom came to the screen door, her brow all wrinkled up, while she wiped her big bands on her apron "He must be still working on that engine. You better go find him, Micky Joe."

"Aw, I ain't his watchdog," I grumbled.

She kicked the screen door open and slung a pine knot at me. I ducked it and went off the porch fast, and kept on through the palm tangle at the corner of the yard. It was the first time she'd heaved anything at me in months.

"You trifling rascal!" she yelled, "You go find Fiddler, you hear me? And bring him home, or you don't get a bite to eat!"

I limped on down to the boardwalk that follows the beach. Finding Fiddler might be easy enough, but bringing him home was another matter. He's six-foot-two and redheaded, and there ain't nobody on the coast, not even a deep-water Greek, wants to get in his way when he's had a couple drinks. I was just as sure as anything that he was getting wound up for trouble, because he'd had a row with his girl and hadn't come home last night,

I didn't know what to do. I stood there hating mom and hating myself, and trying to figger what it was that had got into everybody. It was even working on Cap'n Hook, as we call grandpa, for during the last ten days he hadn't spoke a word to any of us. He just sat on the upper gallery, where ninety years of Beales had watched their boats come in, and stared out at sea. It was the longest silent spell he'd had since pa sailed to the snapper banks and never come back.

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If Sissie had been home, it would have helped a lot. She's got a way with mom, and she's Cap'n Hook's darling. But she'd had a falling out with Johnny Tacon and gone to visit some of mom's folks in Georgia, and we didn't know when we'd see her again.

She'd left the day I was due to sail with Matt and Cap'n Ned, and things had been going wrong ever since. I'd never been out on the Angelus, and at breakfast mom got to wailing about "her baby being took away and drowned like his pa," and It

started an argument that ended with her chasing Matt

and me out the house. That baby stuff always got me; I was towheaded and frecklesnouted, and at fifteen I could lick my weight in anything.

I went stomping into the water to cool off, and darned if I didn't go and step on the biggest stingaree alive. That sting tore into my ankle like a red-hot iron, and I reckon I went clean out my head. Most people do. Matt and Fiddler carried me back to the house, and Cap'n Hook slit the wound and doused it with soda and kerosene while I howled. He don't believe much in doctors, and I remember him glowering at the barometer afterward and grunting, "Hump! Some fool thing always happens on a low glass!"

That sting messed up everything for me, and I even had to stop helping Fiddler and Angel on the Sanderling. You can't ever trust a stingaree wound; they're troublemakers long after they're healed. I couldn't go home and I didn't want to tangle with Fiddler; the dog flies kept me moving, so I fol-lowed the boardwalk around to the ferry

dock at the river mouth. And all the while I prayed that Matt would come back; he's the oldest, and I thought if he would only come back, that things would get all right.

It was a terrible hot evening and the sunset was smearing everything a dirty red. The tide was higher than it had been all summer. Out in the river, Cap'n Dash Lundy was hacking the East Bay ferry towards the slip, and cussing a Tarpon Springs sponger trying to keep off his bow. Another sponger was coming up the channel—the fifth today.

A Greek don't run to cover for nothing. And the Angelus was a week late. It made me kind of sick inside, I never noticed the Partridges' old flivver rolling up till the brakes squealed and Serena jumped out. Serena's Fiddler's girl.

She caught my arm and pulled me over to the side of the dock where the loafers couldn't hear us. She was scared—and that was something new for Serena, who used to play ball with the high-school gang before she grew up. She's slim and black-eyed, and plenty to look at in white. Fiddler was plumb crazy about her.

“I didn't dare go by the house," she whispered. "You know how your mother is. I—“

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, it's that darned fool, Fiddler! Micky Joe, you've got to find him. You've—“

"What's he done?"

"He tried to beat up Johnny Tacon after the dance last night. If I hadn't stopped it—“

"What'd you stop it for? Johnny's been gittin' in his craw for years."

"Will you shut up and listen to me? I broke a date with Fiddler last night and went out with Johnny. Now do you see?"

"Oh." I blinked at her. I wanted to kick her.

"Don't look at me like that. I had plenty of reasons.”

"Yeah, I know your reasons! You an' Fiddler'd had a row an' you figgered you'd go out with Johnny an' make 'im jealous. Well, you done it! He never come home last night. Now if he gits drunk an'

catches Johnny, why—why, he'll kill ‘im!”

"For heaven's sake!" she cried. "Don't waste time arguing about it now! Johnny's carrying a gun—and I just learned that Fiddler's in Dad Hunter's place. You've got to get him out of there, Micky Joe! You've got to make him go home!"

"You're the guy started it! Why don't you?"

"But I can't!" she wailed. "I'm leaving on the ferry right away. Auntie's sick across the bay and alone tonight, and on top of it I promised to meet Sissie and drive her home tomorrow. It just looks like everything's happened all at once!"

“I didn't know Sissie was coming home to-morrow.”

"She didn't intend for you to. It was partly on her account that I—" She broke off as the ferry whistle blew, and suddenly kissed me on the cheek. “Please, honey," she pleaded. “You've just got to do something! I-I'm depending on you."

She ran to her car and drove aboard, and I stood rubbing my cheek while the ferry pulled out. I had the doggonedest feeling, like the earth was dropping away from under me. She'd sure started something. Going out with Johnny Tacon might have worked all right with some fellers, hut with Fiddler it was next to messing with dynamite.

And Fiddler was at Dad Hunter's place. I knowed what that meant. All of a sudden I was plenty scared, too, and I lit off towards Dad Hunt-er's place as fast as I could make my feet work. Fiddler wasn't there. But lying by the counter was a shrimp hand with an eye swelled shut, and there were some others standing over him trying to bring him to with a bucket of water. Nobody spoke, and there wasn't no need to. It's always the same story when Fiddler's been taking on ballast. Fellers just get in his way and forget how quick he is.

"Where's he gone?" I asked Dad Hunter.

Dad only shrugged and spread his hands.

"Was he likkered yet?"

"Jest started. He never got none here."

Dad's the only rascal in town sells that panther sweat right over the counter in broad day, and everybody knows it.

"Sometime," I promised, "I'm agoin' to shove your yeller teeth out through the back 0' your neck. If Fiddler gits in trouble—“

“You git out 0' here!" snarled Dad Hunter.

I cussed him good and went out into the middle of the street, looking every which-a-way. It wasn't quite dark, and it didn't help my feelings none to see the sou'east warning flags hanging from the weather tower. A sou'easter coming—and Fiddler on the loose,

I figgered he might head for his boat, so I forgot my bad foot and ran all the way down to the Mag-nus wharf, where the Sanderling was tied. Some-body was aboard, all right, but it turned out to be his shrimp pardner, Rico Angelini.

"Hey, Angel!" 1 called down the hatch, "You seen Fiddler?"

"Feedler? Na, I fix-a da mote." He stuck his round head above the hatch, blinking like a hairy baboon. "Huh, what'sa da mat'?"

"Plenty's the mat', Fiddler's gittin' likkered! Come on; you gotta help me find 'im!" Angel gaped, then shook his head fast. "Na, na, na, na! You t'ink I cr-r-razee? Feedler fine boy sober, Drunk? Whuff! I gotta beega family—seex-a li'l' girl to feed—Rosa, Carlotta, Amelita, Scraphina, Maria—“

"Never mind that; we gotta keep Fiddler out 0' trouble! If he gits likkered he'll kill Johnny Tacon!" I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him on deck. "Now, you come on!" He came, grumbling. "I no like. Ev't'ing wrong. Feedler he drink. Tide she too high. Glass she too low. Flag say sou'easter she come. Dat no sou'easter! Leesen. You hear?" It was dark now, the water front quiet. There wasn't a breath of wind, but far off I could hear a great roaring, like an express train in the distance. That's what it sounded like—a sort of monster ex-press roaring with destruction.

I think my hair uncurled a little when I realized what caused that sound. It was the pounding of the surf against the island beach, seven miles across the bay. No ordinary sou'easter ever pushed a sea like that ahead of it.

II

WE SEARCHED everywhere for Fiddler that night, but not a soul had seen him, not even Old Man Jim Dooley, the town marshal. We never thought of trying the hotel, simply because it had been full of Federal officers all week. What we didn't know at the time was that the officers had left on the afternoon ferry, and that nobody had dared sell Fiddler a drop till they were gone. Other-wise he'd have been likkered a lot sooner.

Finally Angel went back to the Sanderling, prom-ising to lock the hatch on Fiddler if he came aboard. I limped home, found the house dark and Fiddler's room empty, and sneaked upstairs and crawled in bed. I hadn't eaten since noon, but I was too jumpy and worried to care about it now, and I had that awful feeling of something crowding close and getting ready to happen. My room faces the beach, and all night long I could hear that surf pounding the island. I kept thinking of the Angelus out there somewhere, and whenever I dozed off I'd suddenly wake up staring in the dark, thinking I'd heard Matt cry out in trouble. At dawn the whole sky was an ugly bloody red, and the tide was up over the beach. The queer thing was the wind, which was northeast and quar-tering offshore.

I dressed and went down to the kitchen, and in a few minutes mom came down. She had on an old pink wrapper over her nightgown, and her eyes were puffy.

"What happened to you last night?" she laid into me, real cross. "Why didn't you come home?"

"I got a cramp in my bad foot. I couldn't walk till it left,"

“You’re lyin' to me! What's Fiddler done? Where's he gone?"

"I think mebbe he went to Carra-belle for some motor parts. I dunno. My foot—“

“Why do you lie to me like that? I know when you're lyin'!" She slammed around in the kitchen and finally got breakfast on the table.

Cap'n Hook came down, looking grim, and we ate. At least Cap'n Hook and me ate, but mom didn't. First thing I knowed, she had her head in her hands and was crying. Cap'n Hook stood up, tall and gaunt and gray, and rubbed his gnarled hands on his baggy serge britches. He put me in mind of an old buck eagle disgusted with everything in sight. He started to leave, came back and glowered at mom, Suddenly he took a hitch in his sleeve holders and broke his ten-day silence.

"Hump!" he grunted. "Every tom-fool thing in creation happens on a low glass. She's twenty-nine twenty now, an' fallin'!" He straightened. "Sarah Beale," he ordered, with a rasp that made the windows rattle, "ye've got to git aholt on yourself! There's a big breeze acomin' an' we've got to make ready for it!" I gaped at him. Mom sat up like she'd been shot. "You—you mean to say we're goin' to have a-a—Oh, my God!"

“Last night," I said, "there was only a sou'east warnin' up,"

"Sou'east hell!" he snarled, "There's a real breeze 0 wind makin' up out yonder; this hull coast is goin' to catch the wrath 0' God soon. Micky Joe, go find that scamp Fiddler. If he's likkered an' mean, knock 'im on the head an—“

"The idea!" mom gasped. "Fiddler don't drink!"

“—an' tell Jim Dooley to lock 'im up, so he can't hurt nobody. An' tell the boys to git the boats up the river. Lively! I want ye back to help batten down the house." I left fast. When I reached the Sanderling she was riding so high her deck was above the dock. Nobody was aboard. During the night all the snap-per fleet had come in from outside—all, that is, but the Angelus. I felt pretty sick, but I hurried along the docks, spreading Cap'n Hook's word while I looked for Angel. The sou'east warning was still flying, yet the wind was freshening in the northeast. But it was Cap’n Hook's opinion that counted, and boat after boat began casting off and heading for the swamps. Angel was over by the post office with Cap'n Dash Lundy and the weatherman. "I've no orders to change the warning," the weatherman was saying, and Cap'n Dash was blowing through his whiskers and boasting that he'd never yet allowed a weather scare to keep him off the bay.

"Ya, you fresh-water man," Angel told him. "You never see real breeze 0’ wind. She come dis-a-way, I tell you! An' when she come, she come queek an' bad. Hit dat chicken-coop ferry, mebbe drown ev'body! Ya, you watch-a da barom'. Be damn careful!"

"Crazy Dago," growled Cap'n Dash. "Always hollerin' about the weather,"

"Angel's right," I put in, suddenly remembering Sissie was coming home today. “You'd better be careful! Cap'n Hook says we're going to catch it!"

He cussed me for an impudent young'un, and stomped off. I didn't care. I just hoped to heaven Sissie and Serena would come back before the old fool began his afternoon trip. His son Jed ran the ferry mornings and was a pretty good man, but Cap'n Dash was always taking chances. Angel grabbed my arm. "I find Feedler! He safe now"

"Huh? You found 'im? Where?"

"He gotta da room in Rick's Hotel where he go drink. Me an' Mist' Seem Dooley lock door. He no git away."

A weight seemed to melt off my middle. I told him to take the Sander-ling up the river, and headed home myself to help Cap'n Hook.

Mom was getting lamps and candles ready in case the lights went out later, and Cap'n Hook had caught him a nigger somewhere and was making him nail battens over the shutters.

"Where's Fiddler?" Cap'n Hook de-manded right off.

He blew up when I told him. "An' ye think a hotel door kin hold a red-headed Beale? Git back there fast! Git Jim Dooley to help! Git Angel—the Magnus boys! Hurry!" I laid a straight course for the hotel —and the second I hove in sight of it I seen I was too late. The porter was sitting on the side-walk, spitting blood, somebody inside was hollering, and there was a crowd on the porch looking goggle-eyed down the street. Fiddler had busted loose and gone. *Now I'm in for it proper,* I thought.

I ran on, tracing Fiddler's course by the people staring in his wake. He'd turned the corner past the poolroom and was making for the docks. To head him off, I cut into the alley behind the weather tower, came out by the post office, and was just in time to get caught in the whole thing. I never will forget how it was at that moment: the sticky heat and the sun's glare on the tin roofs and the shell streets; people grouped on every corner and looking ornery, like they wanted to kick a hole through something; and old Man Jim Dooley stand-ing spraddle-legged and cussed above the crowd about the post-office steps, black hat over his turtle face and big silver star gleaming on his white shift. I remember a hound dog come ayelp-ing from behind the post office, with a fishhouse cat riding its back; Old Man Dooley yanked out his pistol and started to take a shot at them; then he stared at a commotion farther up the street and let his pistol dangle. And suddenly everybody was staring. Men were jumping to get clear of some thing coming, and I spotted Johnny Tacon hurrying towards the post office and looking back over his shoulder. Johnny was scared; his long legs were going fast and his green shirt was streaked with sweat.

Then I seen Fiddler coming. Fiddler was swinging straight down the middle of the street, feet apart, shoulders back, spine stiff, bare to the waist and looking bigger than the Manassa Mauler and nine times as mean. The sun was glinting on his great wedge of shoul-ders, his red

hair was blazing like fire, and he didn't even have a list. But he was carrying a terrible load—I could tell it by the way his chin was down and his head was tilted. He was clean off and crazy, and there was a fish knife in his belt and his right band was curved on the handle of it.

I ran to him and spoke, and tried to take him easy by the arm. He swung me rolling across the shells. I got up and came back at him.

"Fiddler," I said again. "Fiddler."

"Go way, Micky Joe," he said, real soft. "Go way. I'm goin' kill a feller. I'm goin' kill that Johnny Tacon. I'm—“

"Fiddler! Please, for God's sake!"

"Go way!" he snarled, and he wasn't my brother Fiddler now. The best feller in the world, the swimmer who'd saved more lives than anyone on the coast.

He wasn't even handsome now; his eyes were narrow and red. He was a tiger. He slapped me, and he was that quick I never seen it coming. I was out before I fell. When I come to, he was going up the post-office steps. Old Man Dooley was trying to stop him with his pistol, and I could see Johnny Tacon's long legs sliding out the side window. But you can't stop a tiger with a word and a threat; Fiddler kept right on up the steps, and Old Man Dooley shot, He shot twice, fast—only Fid-dler's hand was already on the barrel. The pistol went flying. There was the smack of a fist on flesh; Old Man Dooley's feet jerked stiff in front of him, and he spun over into the flower bed and lay still.

Fiddler turned, sort of slow and de-liberate, like he was getting his bear-ings, then he spied Johnny Tacon run-ning towards the end of the street, where Johnny's boat was tied. Fiddler pulled his knife and come down the steps like the wind.

The crowd had fanned out in every direction. But right in Fiddler's path was an old Greek woman who'd tripped in her skirts and fell, and an oysterman in sea boots who'd got confused. I thought he was going to knife the oysterman, but he was saving that knife for Johnny. He flattened the oysterman with a left you couldn't see, stepped careful over the Greek woman, like he was walking on eggs, and ran on.

He wasn't six jumps behind Johnny. I scrambled up and followed, and I'd almost reached the dock when I stubbed my foot and a cramp shot through the stingaree wound. My leg doubled under me like it was hit with an ax, and I went sprawling.

I laid there and clawed the oyster shells. And I seen the flash of Fiddler's knife, seen it turn red, and then Johnny was stumbling across the stern of his boat and blood was streaming down his green shirt. Fiddler drove him over the rail and they went under together. Johnny's head appeared. Then Fid-dler's. And between them drifted a shrimp boat that had just cast off for the swamps. The crew hauled

Johnny aboard, and Fiddler was left splashing in the propeller wash.

For a long time I couldn't do noth-ing but fight my cramp. Fiddler had swum oft someplace down the dock, and I sat there thinking, *Now he's in bad trouble. The law will be on him, and if Johnny dies, they'll hang him.* Fid-dler was my brother, and I had to help him. I had to stay with him till he sobered, and hide him. He'd do the same for me if I got in trouble. Finally I managed to wobble to my feet and limp over to the dock. During the last half hour the weather scare had spread over the whole town; they'd forgot Fiddler, and everywhere I could hear the racket of hammering and men shouting and hurrying to get ready for the wind. All along the water front they were working like the devil to move gear out of the buildings to higher ground, and at the Magnus place they were heaving stuff from the upper windows to sails spread in the street, and a black gang was dragging it back and piling it in the old sponge exchange. The tide had reached dock level, and Heppy Magnus was having fits.

I yelled to Heppy, He come arunnling, eyes popping and shirt hanging out over his fat belly.

"Yonder!" he screamed, pointing up the river. "Dat Feedler, he crazee in de head! He steal my pretty Maris to chase Johnny! See? See? He'll wreck her! I know he'll wreck her!" The little blue Maris was a half mile up the river.

"I'll follow him!" I cried. "I'll take Johnny's boat! I gotta catch him! Mebbe I can make it to the creek in time!"

Johnny's old oyster sloop was the only boat left at the dock. I got the motor going, headed across the harbor; then the motor died and I had to drop the board quick and jump for the halyards. The wind was sweeping over miles of salt marsh and driving straight across the upper bay and the river mouth; it hadn't changed a point all day and now it was beginning to howl. The mains'l banged full; the sloop heeled to her hatches before I could ease the sheet, then she went skipping upstream like a singed cat.

All of a sudden there wasn't any sun, and a line of rain squalls come astreak-mg over the marshes.

Before they hit I got a glimpse of two things I'll never forget. One was the ferry putting out for her afternoon trip, and the other was the weather tower with two square red flags flying from it, stiff as boards. It was the hur-ricane warning.

Then the rain blotted everything from sight, and I had my hands full till I reached the swamps. I dropped sail at the cypress creek where all the boats go in a blow, and drifted on in, And there was the Maris dead ahead, her nose wedged among the other boats. Her pilothouse was empty. Hurrying, I made lines fast to the tangle, grabbed a shark club from the cabin rack, and began crawling for-ward from deck to

deck, searching for Fiddler.

The creek was jammed tight with boats as far up as I could see, and the crews were making a holiday of it. A swamper was busy peddling a bateau of likker. The frogs were hollering, the wind was howling in the cypress tops, rain was flooding over everything, and nobody gave a hoot. Not a soul had seen Fiddler. I crawled onto the landing, and found Angel and a seine-boat crew trying to turn a truck around on the timber road. The tide was up over the road and they were splashing through it like kids, Angel lit like the rest.

"Meeky Joe!" he cried. "Where you come from?" He sobered quick when I told him about Fiddler. "Didn't any of you see him?" I asked.

"I seen Johnny," said one of the seiners. "Bleedin' like a stuck pig. They took him to town on the other truck."

"I 'member!" Angel burst out. "There was 'nother feller—beeg feller, no shirt—try catch dat truck. Look lak Feedler."

"Did-did he catch the truck?"

"No see; rain too hard."

"Let's git to town!" I cried.

We got the truck turned around, piled aboard it, went bouncing through the swamp to the piney woods, and headed licketysplit towards town. I was sick to my middle and desperate; it looked like I'd failed in everything.

One of the seiners said, "Wind's still nor'east. Think she'll back around before we catch it, skipper?"

"She may never back around," growled the skipper, spitting rain. "She's blowin' forty now." I thought we'd never reach town. We finally made it to Main Street, turned towards the docks, and then all of a sudden the sky opened wide and it seemed like solid water was be-ing slung out. It stopped the truck dead in the middle of the street.

"She's come early!" the skipper hol-lered. "This is it!" **III**

WE TUMBLED from the truck, and it was suddenly every man for himself. I ran after Angel and grabbed his arm and begged him to stay with me.

"Damn dat Feedler!" he cried. "I gotta seex-a li'l' girl; dey cry for papa! I go home. You go home too!" He tore away, running fast.

And there I was alone. I hugged a palm till the first squall passed, and managed to reach the lee of the store buildings before the next one hit. It was turning dark, though I couldn't believe it was that late. Figgering Fid-dler would return to the hotel, I laid my course for it, and that was when the wind took aholt and settled things for itself.

It knocked me down, it rolled me along the street; and when I tried to struggle up and fight against it, I couldn't. It was still in the same di-rection, slamming at my back and across town like a great hand, slam-ming harder and harder. It had a deep, slatting, thundering roar

to it, with a scream mixed in, and once when it flung me over I got a glimpse of fish houses going to pieces, of swells smash-ing through buildings and racing up the street to the post-office steps. And high over town whirled a big tin roof like a monster bat.

I went panicky then, and I thought, *I'm in the middle of a hurricane, and if I don't get home I'll I'll sure be killed.*

My foot was full of hot knives, but somehow I made it through the park and reached the boardwalk above the bay. Then my foot caved in. I hung on to Doctor David's picket fence, and I was thinking that nothing worse could happen, when I seen something in the bay that curdled me all inside. It was Cap'n Dash Lundy's ferry. He'd been swept past the river mouth, and now he was trying to edge the ferry into shore and beach her. But the land curves here, and the wind was blowing off the bluff. Seas were smash-ing white over her pilothouse, and the slamming wind was driving her backward, farther and farther from shore.

She was beyond any help, and before the rain blotted her from sight, I made out plain as anything the two cars on her after deck. It didn't take but a glance to recognize one of them. Serena was bringing Sissie home today. They were both on board.

The ferry had hardly vanished when a couple fellers come running from Doctor David's Place struggled through the gate beside me, and stared at the bay.

"Did you see her?" one of them yelled. "Wasn't that our ferry?" It was Jed Lundy, Cap'n Dash's son.

I nodded. My throat wouldn't work.

The other wore a torn green shirt, and there was a fresh bandage on his left arm. Johnny Tacon!

If I'd seen him five minutes earlier it would have made a heap of difference, but Johnny didn't matter much now.

"Sissie—she—she's aboard!" I man-aged to say.

"What's that?" Johnny suddenly whirled on me like a wild man. "How d'you know she's aboard?

You sure?"

I told him. He clutched the pickets and I thought he was going to fold up. It come to me that he was a lot crazier about Sissie than he'd ever let on, though he was such a stubborn, homely duck I never could figger what she seen in him.

All at once he got a grip on himself. "Come on!" he yelled. "We'll follow the beach!

Maybe—maybe—“

Then he was tearing along with the wind, Jed Lundy right behind him. I tried to go, too, but my bad foot wouldn't let me. Then one of the pickets tore loose and I went rolling over the walk. I couldn't

stand, so I grabbed on to a fallen cedar, got to my knees and crawled. That's how I made it home. I kept crawling right on through our side yard and to the lee door of the sun room. It was black dark when I opened it and fell inside.

The draft from it brought mom run-ning. The lights were out and she was carrying a small ship's lantern.

"Oh, my Lord!" she cried. "Cap'n! Micky Joe's hurt!" I tried to tell her I was all right, only I couldn't get it out. I kept seeing the ferry blowing away in the rain, and Johnny Tacon running like a crazy man along the bluff. Cap'n Hook came and helped haul me into the living room. It was the most protected spot in the house, but the rain was flying straight and driving under the shingles and. through the weatherboarding; water was running across the floor and dripping from the ceiling and even running down the stairs. Mom had the rugs rolled up and stacked in a corner, and she'd brung a lot of bedding and clothing down, and piled it on chairs under tarpaulins, so it wouldn't get soaked. Candles were sputtering in the big glass hurricane lamps on the mantel, and extra lanterns were rocking on the old teak table that had come off Cap'n Hook's brig. The wind had a more ter-rible sound here inside, and the whole house kept atrembling like it was hav-ing a spasm.

"Where're ye hurt?" Cap'n Hook demanded.

"Just my foot; it went bad on me."

"Where's Fiddler?" mom begged, her cheeks white and sagging like bis-cuit dough, Just to ease her, I said he was at the hotel. I'd 'a' died before telling her about the ferry with Sissie on it.

"Sarah," Cap'n Hook snapped. 'take a hitch in your worries an git the boy some coffee an' a change 0' clothes. He looks worser'n a drowned rat. The house won't blow away. She was put up by master shipwrights; been ridin' out breezes since 'forty-two!"

"Oh, Lordy," mom moaned. " Why'd I ever leave Georgia an' marry a Beale?" She flung some clothes at me and I stripped and changed. She come in with coffee and fish, and her voice went higher.

"Just listen to it!" she wailed. "An' they're all away from home! All but my baby!"

"Aw, fer— Don't call me that now."

"Why don't they come home to me on a night like this? I wouldn't keep them worried so. Matt, he's been gone twenty-two days. Why, his ice would all be melted."

"Sarah," said Cap'n Hook.

"You leave me alone! All you Beales are alike. Won't stay off the water! I done lost Nick an this time I know it's Matt I just know it! Mebbe Fiddler too! Oh Lord in heaven!"

Cap'n Hook laid down his barometer and his gaunt old eagle face

was grimmer than ever.

"Sarah," he said quiet like, " these things happen. Ye've got to learn to face them when they come. No blood 0' mine would ever want to die in bed with a nightshirt round him. There ain't no better end for a man than to go down at sea. I hope I kin go that way, an I know Matt an' Fiddler be the same." With that, he broke out the card table and ordered us to draw up our chairs. "There'll be no sleep-ing tonight," he said. "We'll have a round 0' rummy.

The game seemed to keep mom's mind off things, like Cap'n hook intended. It didn't help me none. While the wind slammed and roared harder and harder outside, I tried to figger where the ferry would go if it stayed afloat only I couldn't see it staying afloat at all. Then I happened to look up, and there on the mantel between the hurri-cane lamps was Sissie's piecture. The large one she'd had taken when she graduated from high school. She was a happy little thing and not a bit like the rest of us Beales. Her hair wag all shining gold, and the photographer had sort of clouded it about her face so that she looked like an angel.

I didn't know I was sniffling till Cap'n Hook snapped, "Here, here! What the devil ails ye?"

"Nothin'," I gulped.

"Then watch the game," he or-dered. . . “Play, Sarah." We played, and now the rain was a terrible solid thing against the house. Water streamed down the cypress pan-eling; it poured like a fountain down the stairs and gushed black from the fireplace. One of the hurricane lamps teetered and crashed on the hearth. Morn dropped her cards and screamed.

I got up and put my arm around her, but she didn't quiet till Cap'n Hook took the battens off his tongue and began to talk about himself. It was something he'd never done before. He held up his long gnarled hands, all covered with scars. "Ye see them scars, Sarah? I got 'em on the Guinea Coast when I was a lad."

Mom asked, "Wh-what were you doin' on the Guinea Coast?" Blackbirdin'. The skipper got lik-kered an' somebody sold 'im a bunch 0' cannibals with filed teeth. They busted loose. That was a night! An' blowin' near bad as this. Ye know, a breeze down under the line blows opposite from what it does here. It whirls same as the clock."

"The idea! But—but what about those cannibals?"

"They bit," snarled Cap'n Hook, rubbing the scars. "Some was kilt, but we got 'em stowed, and got a fair wind later. Seventeen days goose-wingin' the Trades, bound for Brazil. An' then we run slap onto a Yankee gunboat alayin' for us.

"They—they catch you?"

"They sunk us! Within sight 0’ shore, an' two hundred niggers under

the gratings. That's a Yankee for ye! Damn 'em! I was fifteen, but they'd 'a' hanged me jest the same if I hadn't swum for it. I could swim well as any one 0' the boys in them days. I mind once in 'sixty-four—"

And so it went till the candles burned down to nubbins.

Then suddenly he stopped and sat up, and the spell on us broke. A wet draft roared through the house.

I near swallered my tongue when Johnny Tacon stumbled in upon us, dripping water, gasping. He had the awful staring look of a drowned man. He'd lost the bandage off his arm and blood was welling through the stitches.

"Where's Fiddler?" he croaked. "Tell me quick! I gotta find 'im!"

"Easy," said Cap'n Hook, rising. "Fiddler ain't here. What ails your arm?"

"Never mind the arm!" cried Johnny. "Find Fiddler! He's the only one kin do anything! The ferry's gone down near Green Point! Jed Lundy an' me sighted her just before dark, awash to her pilothouse, everybody packed in it—Sissie, Serena—"

"Sissie!" screamed mom, and dropped in a heap. Cap'n Hook froze.

"Tried to launch a boat! Smashed it in the dark! Jed's gone for another! But it's no use till somebody swims it first with a line! If-if we kin only find Fiddler—"

IV

I WAS already up and running for the door and if there was anything wrong with my foot, I never felt it.

"Hold it!" Cap'n Hook barked. "We can't save a soul by tearin' off half cocked. Luff up, Johnny; ye're in bad shape. I'll fix that arm while I figger what to do."

In two shakes he d ripped up one of my shirts and bound Johnny's arm, and then he was herding us into the storeroom and loading us with coils of rope and crab line. Johnny had fought the wind most of the night to reach us, and he said led Lundy was rounding up the seiners near the point. "They ought to be draggin a boat through the woods now. It's near daylight."

"Your pa's truck handy?" asked Cap'n Hook.

"In the barn, but it'll never run in this rain!"

"She'll have to run! There's nary 'nother way to find Fiddler an' git out there in time! Make for the truck—lively!"

We followed him out the sun-room door into the dim morning. The wind rolled us in a heap; we got up, butted our heads against it, and failing and rising with the gusts, fought our way to the lee of the oleanders and the alley fence. I don't know how Johnny stayed with us, after fightin' the thing so long and being hurt in the bargain.

We made it to the Tacon barn, pried the battens off the doors, and then a miracle happened. The rain stopped. The wind gave a little

moan and died. In the sudden dead calm there wasn't a sound save dripping water and the rumbling of the surf. Mrs. Tacon's old red rooster limped from the barn, ruffled his wet feathers and went through all the motions of crowing without making a squawk. I was gaping at the mangled trees when Cap'n Hook bellowed, "Hurry! Git that truck rollin'!

We're in the center!"

We got under way, but with the down trees and wreckage in the streets I thought I'd never reach the hotel. I didn't know where else to look for Fiddler, and as I finally whirled the truck up in the rear of the place and we piled out, I had a sudden horrible fear that Fiddler hadn't come back here at all that he was still slogging through the damp, drunk and crazy.

The calm was still with us—a calm so dead and empty it felt like the end of the world. We shoved into the kitchen where the colored cook was trying to mop up and brew coffee, and dashed for the back stairs. At the turn of the upper hall we saw a door hanging on a binge. We ran to it. It was Fiddler's room and Fiddler had come back to it. He was spread out on the bed, bare to the waist, as I'd seen him last, wet and dirty, and clutching half a baked ham he'd snitched from the kitchen. Every-thing was soaked and in a mess, and Fiddler was snoring through it all as peaceful as a lamb, his mop of curls making a red halo about his head.

We fell on Fiddler, shaking him, slapping him, begging him to get up. I slung a washbowl of water in his face, and he knocked the bowl across the room and sat up, cussing. Then he caught sight of Johnny, blinked, and swung to his feet like a bolt of lightning. We grabbed his arms and hustled him into the hall and down the stairs. Johnny ran ahead to get coffee ready, and Cap'n Hook snarled, "Git aholt to yourself, Fid-dler! The ferry's gone down an' little Sissies on it!"

“An' Serena too!" I hol-lered, hauling him into the kitchen. "We gotta git a line to 'em before they drown! You hear me, Fiddler? Can you do it?"

The tiger had gone. He looked so rocky it scared me. He leaned on my shoulder, staring at Johnny. "You say—“

Johnny could hardly stand. He thrust a mug of coffee into Fiddler's hands. "Drink it!" he ordered.

"Git your fool drunken head clear! We can't launch a boat till you swim out with a line. I tried it. Might 'a'

made it if you hadn't cut me up! You git that, Fiddler? Now it's up to you—if they drown—" Johnny clutched the table. All of a sudden his knees buckled and he crumpled on the floor. It hit Fiddler hard. "Please, God,” he prayed. "Please, God, forgive me!" Then he stiffened as the hotel rocked in a blast of returning wind. The calm was over.

The wind had turned. We let Johnny lay and rushed to the truck.

Before we were well under way the wind was on us in a banging roar, and the truck was fighting it like a ship in a head sea, and barely moving. Things that had stood the strain from the northeast were whipping the other way and tearing loose. We reached the old coast road, and all we'd lost was a fender; I don't know what hit it. Stinging spoondrift was blowing off the bay, and for a while the high banks of palmettos protected us. Then we swung around a curve and I was so blinded with the stuff that I drove slap into a tangle of broken pines. The motor stopped, and that was the end of it. We piled out. We were just on the edge of Green Point hammock. Way off in the flooded pines to the left, like shadows in the flying salt spray, I could make out people moving. It was Jed Lundy and the seiners with a boat. We grabbed our gear and pushed towards them. And it was a job, for pines were falling all the time and there were hundreds down as far as I could see, all lying in two direc-tions, like a giant had slapped them first one way and then the other; The tide was washing through the woods in long surges, and a couple dozen men were struggling in it to clear the boat—a big seine skiff that was jammed in a tangle of pine tops. The bad news had spread, and more men were hurrying behind us to help.

Fiddler was wide awake now, and wild. He got things going. You could hear him yelling above the wind, and fellers who'd jumped from him yester-day fell to and worked like demons. They freed the boat. They dragged it after him to a palm grove near the point. The wind was on us full force and the last few yards were a battle.

The palms were all leaning like um-brellas blown inside out, and fellers were clinging to them and staring at something out in the bay. The ridge here was awash, and beyond it where the marsh had been were great smash-ing seas with a few splintered pines showing above the crests. Way off by the point was a dim black object near lost in the spray—the ferry's pilot-house. Sissie was in there—Sissie and Serena and a lot of other people. Packed in there all through the night, waiting for it to go to pieces.

I didn't see how even a fish could swim it, for the point juts south here and the wind was driving across it to the upper bay. But lines were rigged between the broken trees and swim-mers were trying to battle out beyond shore. It was hopeless.

Fiddler went lunging through the grove in a sort of frenzy, and every eye was suddenly on him. He was out of his clothes in a flash, and, grabbing the end of the crab line, he cast a bowline in it and threw the loop over his shoulder. He never took his eyes off the ferry, and he never stopped mov-ing. I was right behind him, keeping the crab line clear. The idea was to get the crab line to the ferry first, then

haul out the heavy rope that was to pull the boat. It was the only way. At the sight of Fiddler, the others jumped to help, clearing the snarl of ropes, making the new ones fast, get-ting the crab line ready to pay out. They believed in Fiddler. They knew he could do it. He was the greatest swimmer on the coast.

He looked it, with his big shoulders and the long muscles rippling down his back. But he was rocky from that likker. And that little crab line was go-ing to feel like a ton, with the seas against it. Fiddler would never give up as long as he could draw breath and I knowed he'd drown if he didn't have help.

I was a already tearing off my clothes as fast as I could. When he plunged in, I took the line in my teeth and fol-lowed.

V

HE GOT out past the trees, then a big sea smashed him back. Now he did what none of the others had thought of trying. Just before the next one hit, he dove and stayed under. I jerked in slack from behind and dove, too, and I stayed under as long as I could. It worked. We could swim under water when we couldn't swim on top. That's why the rest had failed. The only thing that worried me was my bad foot; I was scared it would play out before I could do Fiddler much good. But I'd always been able to swim under water better'n on top, and that sort of put us even.

When I come up for air I spotted him for an instant far ahead; a flash and he was down again like a porpoise. I pulled in more slack and slid after him. There were stobs and briers down here, raking my belly, but there wasn't any wind and sea to throw me back. Finally there was saw grass, cutting like razors. I didn't care. We were over the marsh, making progress. When I felt sand under me I figgered we had a chance. For we were out of the marsh and in the bay.

And then I lost the line. I don't know how it happened. One second I had it in my teeth, and the next second I didn't. I kept thrashing around and diving, and when I did find it, it was worse than losing it. For it wasn't the bight of the line I found, it was the loop that Fiddler had been carrying. Then I thought I would go crazy. Fiddler was gone and I was alone. It was awful. Then a sea rolled me over and I got a glimpse of the pilothouse. I was so close I could see the broken windows and people's faces staring out.

I dove, and the picture of those staring faces kept me going. One of them was Sissie. Down deep was slack water, and I went kicking and clawing over the sand till my lungs were split-ting and my bad foot was afire. The crab line over my shoulder felt like it was dragging the weight of the world behind it. I was done for when I touched wood.

I managed to push to the surface, and there was the ferry's lee cap rail, not a foot from my nose. I tried to reach out and grab it. I

couldn't. I was plumb used up. A sea smashed over me and I knowed I was a goner. And that was when something grabbed me by the hair and pulled. I didn't know for a long time that it was Fiddler.

After he'd lost the line in some drift, he spotted me swimming with it up to wind'ard. He was too weak to catch me, so he come on as best he could, and caught on the broken hawser trailing over the ferry's bow. Just as he pulled himself up, he seen me floating past. I never could figger how he managed to hold to me with the seas smashing over us, and slide along the cap rail to the lee of the pilothouse. He done it all right, for that's where we were when I come to. Even so, we were in a bad fix and too tuckered to crawl on deck. Cap'n Dash or his engineer should 'a' given us a hand, but they never ap-peared. I didn't learn why till next day.

It was Serena that crawled out to us and pulled us over the rail. Serena, she's sure got what it takes. The pilothouse was full of men what could have come out, only they was a bunch of Holy Rollers on a picnic; they'd hol-lered all night for God to help 'em, and now they were on their knees crying about Judgment Day.

It took all three of us to haul in the crab line trailing the heavy rope; and when the rope was fast to the bitts, Fiddler had to rout out some of those crazy Holy Rollers and make 'em help drag the boat to us. We heaved our heads off before the boat appeared. There were four big oarsmen in it, straining on the oars for all they were worth, and an extra man in the stern sheets going like mad with the bailng bucket.

Then the Holy Rollers made a dash to get aboard, and Fiddler had to lay into them with both fists so we could load their women first. Serena dragged Sissie out and put her aboard—Sissie had got a crack on the head and couldn't stand. It took two heart-breaking trips to get everybody ashore, and Serena wouldn't go till the last. She still had enough scrap in her to finish her two-day-old fight with Fiddler.

"Think I'd live with a drunken fool?" she screamed at him. "I'd rather drown!"

"Come on!" he yelled at her. "She's breaking up!"

"Not till you promise to stop it!"

"I promise, damn it!" And he threw her into the boat. We trailed ashore on the rope. It went slack as we reached the palms, and when I looked back the ferry was gone.

The breeze blew on inland that afternoon; I missed seeing the worst of the damage, for I slept the clock around and Cap'n Hook made me stay in bed four days. Fiddler was up the next morning helping look for Cap'n Dash. They told me that the ferry's engine stopped just before she went aground, and that to keep from cap-sizing, Cap'n Dash and his nigger went aft to roll the cars off the stern. A big sea swept

the deck and carried them away. Their bodies never were found.

Fiddler had the law to think about for a while. But nobody would testify against him, least of all Johnny, so he got off on probation. And Serena made him keep his promise. There've been breezes since, and some were bad, but I'll never see one that left so deep a mark. I remember those days of waiting afterward, when I'd be helping Fiddler clear the drift-wood from around the house, and how we'd turn and study every sail that hove in sight, staring at it a long time while we tried to tell ourselves that it was the Angelus, and that Matt would be home soon. And up in the gallery Cap'n Hook sitting grim and silent, watching too. We kept waiting and praying for the Angelus, but she never come in.

Early on a Sunday a month later, when the tide was at ebb, Father Dono-van held final service for the Angelus and all the lost ones down at the river mouth, and everybody in town came and brought flowers and cast them into the water, and sang that old, old song, The Golden Shore, while the tide carried the flowers out to sea.

And from the coming next week section of the magazine:

Revolving Monsters, by Alexander Key

This week Mr. Key gave you a brilliant and exciting short story about a hurricane which hit a small Gulf Coast town. Next week he turns to the facts and describes the birth and the destructive careers of these devastating winds which roar up from the tropics during this “hurricane month.”